

# **Evangelical Popular Religion as a Source for North American Liberation Theology? Insights from Postmodern Popular Culture Theory**

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*"God can turn it around for you."  
Oral Roberts*

*"America, you must be born again...your whole structure  
must be changed."  
Martin Luther King, Jr.*

"We need a liberation theology that will draw on the folk piety of Baptists, Methodists, and the rest." At least this possibility has been suggested by Harvey Cox, an influential Protestant theologian and social critic.<sup>1</sup> But how should we assess this idea? Is it plausible to speculate that mainstream evangelical popular religion in the United States might take a form, either now or in the future, that opposes the society's and culture's dominant power structures, and upholds the interests of poor people and others who are excluded from power? Can we imagine an evangelical religious-social movement analogous to liberation theologies, the diverse but interrelated set of radical interpretations of Christianity

developed since the 1960s by third world Christians, feminists, African Americans and others?<sup>2</sup>

This essay considers these questions in the light of postmodern popular culture theory. In recent years there has been a surge of scholarly interest in studying secular popular culture as a site of cultural-political contestation. Cultural critics have produced a large literature on cultural theory and many important studies of topics such as popular music, film and television. Frequently these studies have drawn on poststructuralist cultural criticism, which highlights how what we experience as “reality” is constituted through cultural texts, and how the meanings of such texts are unstable strategies of persuasion that are always open to transformation, fragmentation and/or subversion. Many critics use such theories to argue that popular culture should receive the same scholarly respect and attention as elite “high culture” and that popular culture may have significant potential to transform or subvert dominant structures of power.<sup>3</sup> Many of these critics—though not all of them—highlight the relationships between poststructuralist instabilities in meaning and larger historical and political situations. Often they draw on neo-Gramscian theory; they interpret strategies of persuasion in cultural texts as part of an open-ended struggle for cultural hegemony. Discursive strategies are seen as part of a battle over who defines what is considered “reality” in any given historical situation, and this battle is analyzed as part of larger struggles for power.<sup>4</sup> In common usage, “postmodern” criticism of popular culture tends to imply some variation on poststructuralist approaches and/or theories of cultural hegemony. The ideal type of “postmodern” critic, as I will use the term here, blends both approaches.

Postmodern popular culture theories offer valuable resources for understanding popular religion in the United States—including that of Jerry Falwell and other conservative evangelicals—just as they do for analyzing secular mass communications. There is no doubt that conservative evangelicals are a significant cultural force in the contemporary United States, that many people within the broader mosaic of evangelicalism are self-consciously engaged in cultural-political contestation, and that religious popular culture is being mobilized as a resource and weapon in this struggle.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a major issue for evangelicals is contestation over the interpretation of a text (the Bible) that has great power to constitute reality for those who live within its symbolic world.<sup>6</sup> (Of course Falwell interprets this case of instability in textual interpretation as the unfortunate result of human sin; he clearly perceives contestation, but for him the contest is between the “literal meaning” of the Bible—his reading—and error.)

These general considerations lead to a further question: might evangelical popular religion take the form of postmodern political resistance? Armed with postmodern popular culture theory, many critics have been

searching for instabilities in a dominant culture that scholars had earlier perceived as a firm structure of power, and for counter-hegemonic possibilities in cultural practices that had earlier seemed apolitical, marginal or so compromised that they hardly counted as relevant opposition.<sup>7</sup> These critics have not only highlighted the oppositional potential of texts like rock music and film noir, but have also explored the counter-hegemonic possibilities of cultural practices that appear to be quite unpromising sites of opposition. For example, one critic discovered a proto-feminist consciousness among consumers of romance novels; despite the genre's gender stereotypes and frequent rape scenes, she argued that readers could identify with self-assertive heroines overcoming obstacles and could use their own reading as a way to assert their personal needs.<sup>8</sup> Another often-cited book goes so far as to hold out heroin addiction as an oppositional cultural style allied to black power.<sup>9</sup> If even such extreme cases include some untapped potential for opposition, the counter-hegemonic potential of conservative evangelicalism seems well worth investigating. However, relatively few scholars have pursued this line of thought; most religious scholars who have explored oppositional popular religion have focused on religious practices linked to overtly radical and politicized interpretations of Christianity such as Latin American liberation theology and forms of Afro-American religion.<sup>10</sup> Only a handful have explored the oppositional potential of mainstream evangelicalism in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Harvey Cox, the theologian and critic quoted above, is one of the most influential among this select few. His bestseller, *Religion in the Secular City*, provides an excellent point of departure for assessing the potential of evangelical opposition. Cox's pioneering pursuit of this question has developed central insights that are important, indeed exemplary in relation to much of the literature. This article is intended as constructive work in a similar vein. His agenda is to search for and promote counter-hegemonic movements rooted in evangelicalism, as suggested by his call for a liberation theology drawing on Baptist and Methodist folk piety. This idea may have important consequences for thinking about religion and social change in the United States, and it is surprising how few of the existing critical commentaries on Cox's book have stressed its importance.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, Cox weakens his larger argument through two theoretical distortions, both of which he inherited from and shares with much scholarship on evangelicalism. First, in his general treatment of the relationship between conservative evangelicals and modernity, he overestimates and overgeneralizes about evangelical resistance to modernity. He presents Jerry Falwell, his prototypical conservative evangelical, as a variant of "postmodern theology,"—a much stronger move than merely presenting a reading of Falwell's message informed by postmodern critical tools or merely highlighting the "postmodern" potential of parts of Falwell's mes-

sage. In short, he draws overly general conclusions from aspects of Falwell's message that resist modernity, and downplays crucial aspects of Falwell's thought and practice that are in harmony with modernity.

The second theoretical distortion is an overemphasis on the power of mass media to neutralize or trivialize evangelical opposition to hegemonic culture. After excessive stress on the general opposition between conservative evangelicals and modernity, Cox's discussion of religious television swings the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. He argues that because a person like Jerry Falwell uses television, he and his constituency *cannot* be oppositional. His theories do not consider the possibility of evangelicals' television messages being unstable in meaning and open to a variety of interpretations.

In relation to both modernity and mass media, Cox uses theories that are too sweeping. They distract from a focus on complexity, diversity and contestation within the world of conservative evangelicalism—a focus that is not only needed for clarity of understanding, but is precisely what Cox needs to highlight to advance his larger goal of North American liberation theology. This paper proposes to refine constructively Cox's analytical approach for the benefit of future studies expanding on his insights.

### **Evangelicalism and Modernity in *Religion in the Secular City***

It is important to stress that I am considering Cox's recent book, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology*, because Cox's views have changed considerably over the years. For twenty-five years he has addressed and helped to shape trends in social thought among mainline Protestants.<sup>13</sup> He is most famous for his 1965 best-seller *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, which presented secularization and liberal reform as the most appropriate contemporary forms of Biblical religion.<sup>14</sup> In harmony with the broader trend of postmodern hostility toward liberal modernity, *Religion in the Secular City* turns the 1965 argument upside down. Whereas *The Secular City* proposed a "secular theology" that accommodated to the perceived virtues of modern urban society, *Religion in the Secular City* advocates a "postmodern theology" that resists a failing project of modernity and takes its moral stand with those "outside the gates" of modernity.

We should begin by specifying Cox's definition of modernity, since, as he notes, this word is used in many ways which are sometimes contradictory. Cox defines modernity through its "five pillars": a world political system based on nation-states, the power of science-based technology, bureaucratic rationalization as the mode of organization, profit maximization as the means of motivating work and distributing goods, and "the secularization and trivialization of religion."<sup>15</sup> For Cox, these themes come together in a relatively unified vision of technocratic corporate capi-

talism on an international scale, coupled with an apolitical form of religion and spirituality.

Cox argues that modern liberal theology, the way of thinking about religion that became dominant in the so-called "mainline" denominations, was born through "the gelding of God." As he tells the story, religious leaders were allowed by a newly ascendant and anti-clerical bourgeoisie to keep a limited part of their traditional privileges, but only at a high price. First, religious liberals tacitly agreed to limit their religious efforts to the private and spiritual realms, thus taking the political economy of modernity for granted. And second, they addressed their theology to the "cultured despisers" of religion rather than the people who were victims of the modern system; they elaborated a modern and "enlightened" interpretation of the Christian tradition and tried to defend it in the terms set forth by the dominant culture of the Enlightenment. The essence of postmodern theology, for Cox, is a "rupture" with this twofold arrangement. Postmodern theology makes pointed critiques of the political and economic status quo, and it addresses itself to the victims of this status quo. Indeed Cox hopes it will become a voice with the victims and of them, not merely addressed to them.<sup>16</sup>

Cox's first conceptual problem arises from his interpretation of conservative evangelicalism's historical development, which he explains primarily through evangelical resistance to modernity. The basic structure of his book presents Falwell's fundamentalism and Latin American liberation theology as two variations of religion that are opposed to modernity. By the end of the book he has rejected Falwell's type of "postmodernism," endorsed the Latin Americans' version, and called for a North American liberation theology. But in order to present Falwell in this context he must engage a vigorous debate that has been going on among historians of North American religion over the past few years: is it better to stress conservative Protestants as reacting against and resisting modernity, or as a historical development unfolding hand in hand with modernity?<sup>17</sup> The choices are not mutually exclusive, since there is important evidence supporting both sides of this argument; rather, the issue is which note to emphasize as an interpretive paradigm. Cox clearly leans toward the "resistance" interpretation; unfortunately this is the side that has been losing the debate, with especially severe setbacks on issues that are central to Cox's argument.

To understand this debate requires a short excursus into a terrain that is foreign to many scholars of United States culture: religious historiography as a form of contestation over internal church politics. Most parties to this debate, including Cox, are addressing the unexpected growth of conservative evangelical numbers and prestige over the past few decades, which stands in sharp contrast with stagnation in "mainline" Protestant growth and prestige since the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Recently the "evangelicalism as

resistance to modernity” argument has been advanced most vigorously—though not exclusively—by scholars sympathetic to conservative and neo-conservative agendas for responding to this situation.

According to conservative versions of this argument, the key dynamic of conservative evangelicalism is resistance to liberal ways of thinking and organizing society. The growing power and influence of conservative Protestantism over the past few decades is seen to result from virtuous evangelical opposition to a bankrupt “liberalism” in general, and to the perceived moral vacuousness and anarchy of the 1960s in particular. The post 1960s stagnation of liberal Protestantism is blamed on a failure to “resist modernity” in an analogous way, and Cox’s earlier *Secular City* is often cited as an especially reprehensible example of this failure. Conservative commentators often use this line of thinking to celebrate aspects of the conservative Protestant success and to call for the mainline denominations to stop their stagnation by becoming more like the religious right, or at least to move closer to neo-conservatism.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes this approach—not to be confused with Cox’s—also calls itself “postmodern theology.”<sup>20</sup>

Not all scholars who lean toward a “resistance to modernity” analysis of conservative Protestant growth endorse the conclusions that conservative commentators draw from it. There is a sense in which conservatives have a “purchase” on the argument, like Republicans who have made the flag of the United States “their” symbolic property. But many scholars who are not conservatives accept the basic interpretation—evangelical resurgence based on resistance to modernity—and go on to deplore the resurgence as intolerant, ethnocentric, sexist, nostalgic or otherwise misguided. The majority of debates in religious historiography about evangelical growth are struggles between such liberal applications of the theory and the conservative versions described above. Cox also rejects celebratory conservative applications of the resistance logic, but his strategy is to give such logic a radical twist. He presents evangelical growth less as a conservative reaction against oppositional movements of the 1960s, and more as “postmodern.” By this he certainly means “rebellious” and “opposed to the establishment.” And given his definition of the modern status quo which stresses corporate capitalism, “postmodern” also seems to imply a reaction (actual or potential) against dominant capitalist structures.

Meanwhile, unfortunately for this aspect of Cox’s argument, leading scholars have increasingly used an alternative logic of interpretation—conservative Protestantism and modernity as *complementary* rather than oppositional—to critique and qualify “resistance” arguments. George Marsden, the most influential historian of fundamentalism, has increasingly emphasized how conservative Protestantism has shared—not resisted—attributes of modern dominant culture of the United States. He highlights evangelicals’ individualistic, experiential and democratic sensibilities, as well as their eager and skillful use of mass communications. And he

takes pains to defend the legitimacy and thoughtfulness of evangelical scholarship, judged by common intellectual standards. This interpretive logic based on accommodation is combined, in Marsden's nuanced scholarship, with more conventional arguments about evangelical resistance to modernity—especially to twentieth-century manifestations of secular modernity.<sup>21</sup> But a growing minority of religious historians have begun to move the “accommodationist” aspects of evangelicalism to the center of their interpretations—especially when considering the recent evangelical resurgence that is Cox's special concern. From this point of view evangelicalism “is best understood not as a negative reaction to, but as an integral part of, the modernization process.”<sup>22</sup> Thus the main theme of recent evangelical history is not resistance to the “moral anarchy of the 1960s” but accommodation to individualism, capitalism, nationalistic patriotism and so on.

This logic of interpretation is more illuminating than the more common logic based on evangelicals resisting modernity—but to admit this is to undercut Cox's presentation. It means that his argument is built on an unnecessarily weak analytical foundation. Cox's foundation is weakest where he needs it to be the strongest: on the central issue of Falwell's opposition, or lack of it, to technocratic corporate capitalism. But throughout the book Cox's assumptions about Falwell's resistance to modernity create ambiguities and analyses that may be misleading. For example, Cox follows the more familiar “resistance” logic when he distinguishes a rebellious “postmodern” Falwell from more moderate, modern Protestants on the grounds that moderates are more willing to dialog with broader society and engage in social action.<sup>23</sup> But surely by this definition Falwell should be considered quite moderate. Indeed, in many ways the Moral Majority was a politically conservative and Southern variation on a religious tradition that was known in its politically liberal and Northern guise as the Social Gospel—the movement often cited as the classic example of Protestantism “accommodating” to modernity.<sup>24</sup>

Cox may not be severely troubled by this, given the overall goals of his argument. Remember that he proposes not only to study fundamentalism as “postmodern,” but also to criticize Falwell's fundamentalism, showing that it is a less useful source for postmodern theology than liberation theologies. He makes two kinds of criticisms. First, he makes the normative judgment that Falwell is unacceptably anti-pluralistic and apocalyptic. This is consistent with the idea of Falwell as postmodern in Cox's sense.<sup>25</sup> Second, Cox leans heavily on a criticism that stresses Falwell's accommodation to consumer capitalism through his use of mass media.

In this second sense Cox in effect argues—ironically in light of his overall argument—that fundamentalism is an inadequate form of postmodern theology because it is not really postmodern, at least in this important respect. But if so, should Cox present Falwell as a rebel against

modernity in the first place? More important, are there grounds for hoping that evangelical groups espousing North American liberation theology are likely to develop in the future? Cox's argument continually ties itself in knots: his underlying logic presents Falwell's fundamentalism as virtuous resistance to the modern, even though one of his major goals is to reject fundamentalism because of its accommodation to modernity. He looks to fundamentalism for possible future resistance to modernity, only to discover practices that may tie fundamentalists to modernity.

In many ways this conceptual problem simply reflects the multivocality of religion and the complexity of experience in contemporary society; conservative evangelicalism has contradictory aspects, especially when considered as a movement of diverse people who have transformed themselves across history. But this very complexity suggests that words like "accommodation" and "resistance" cannot be used as total orientations to life. It is much more productive and true to experience to stress multiple layers, or aspects, of experience. Rather than ask whether fundamentalists mainly accommodate or resist a unified culture, we need to place more specific questions at the center of attention: "Accommodation to what specific aspect of culture?" "Resistance to what in particular?" For example, fundamentalists may resist abortion at the same time as they accommodate wholeheartedly to capitalism, imperialism or racism. Again, their apocalyptic attitude may lead them toward ahistorical thoughts on Sunday and militant political action on Monday—or militant rhetoric on Sunday and passive lifestyles on Monday.<sup>26</sup> The point is to specify what kinds of resistance, in what circumstances, are under consideration. Only when we specify which aspects of society are in view can claims about accommodation or resistance to them be made with conceptual clarity.

Cox is moving toward this kind of framework when he presents a generally resistant "postmodern" Falwell who is also an accommodated "modern" consumerist. But by making this framework clearer and more explicit Cox's analysis could be strengthened, and some of its ambiguities clarified. However, such an approach would also tend to undermine Cox's theme of conservative evangelicalism as a form of anti-modernism. Jerry Falwell does preach about resisting secular liberalism and participates in a historical movement that resists aspects of modernity. He is also a university president who controls a major institution of mass media and has very powerful allies among government and business elites. His rhetoric critiques aspects of United States society yet also supports the same society. He articulates certain problems of his constituency yet his main solution is individual prayer and monetary contributions to allow him to broadcast more television shows, as well as (recently muted) efforts to mobilize people for both "moral reform" and the support of capitalism and nationalism.<sup>27</sup> As Cox would certainly agree, such complexity cannot be illuminated with single words like "resistance," "accommodation" and

“postmodernism.” But given Cox’s definition of modernity, we might surmise that Falwell’s general embrace of the “five pillars of modernity” would be the first point for Cox to stress, rather than Falwell’s resistance to certain trends in theology and social morality. However, since Cox has begun by presenting conservative evangelicalism primarily as a movement reacting against the dominant culture of the United States, his overall argument is unnecessarily distorted: he has difficulty highlighting Falwell’s attempts to accommodate people to United States nationalism, capitalism or imperialism.

### Televangelism and Cultural Contestation Over Evangelicalism

My argument thus far provides little encouragement for cultural critics exploring the oppositional potential of conservative evangelicalism. However, just as we must answer the question, “resistance to what *aspects* of modernity?” we must ask “resistance *by whom*, and in whose interest?” In other words, we must clearly understand that Jerry Falwell is not the only historical subject within the highly diverse world of conservative Protestantism. Cox treats Falwell as his representative of “redneck religion.” But there are major differences between Jerry Falwell, the television star and politician, and his various working-class followers whom Cox (following Falwell) describes as “rednecks.”<sup>28</sup> And this is only the beginning of the full complexity and diversity of evangelicalism that has been stressed in recent literature.<sup>29</sup> White working-class Baptists and a very wide array of other evangelicals who hear Falwell are free to draw their own conclusions for their own purposes, which will often diverge from Falwell’s. They can accept what they find helpful from Falwell’s anti-establishment rhetoric, and reject the rest. Presumably Cox hopes for something like this when he advocates liberation theologies rooted in evangelical folk piety.

But again, Cox’s theoretical presuppositions significantly undermine his better insights. At this point in Cox’s argument, his pendulum swings from excessive optimism about Falwell’s general “postmodern” resistance to an excessive pessimism about any opposition coming from a movement compromised by modern mass communication. For Cox, Latin American liberation theology is a promising form of postmodern opposition because the Latin Americans have organized themselves into small face to face groups called basic Christian communities, which Cox relates to Habermas’ “communicative life-worlds.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast, conservative North American Protestants are tied to religious mass media. Cox sees this as a fatal flaw, an Achilles heel that ironically exposes Falwell as too accommodated to modernity and lacking in oppositional potential.<sup>31</sup>

But such an argument can be misleading, even if we set aside the central issue of evangelical diversity and focus only on the smaller group of evangelicals who actually watch religious television.<sup>32</sup> Cox does not

show why the political movement he desires must be organized through small face-to-face groups. Clearly there is a need for some form of human solidarity and communication. But Cox does not explain why one who watches religious television could not also participate in small groups (or large political movements) at other times of the week.<sup>33</sup> He seems to reason that since oppositional popular piety needs to be expressed through small groups, it cannot also be expressed through mass media. Since increasing numbers of evangelicals have been communicating through mass media over the past few decades, Cox sees tradition and resistance moving toward accommodation or trivialization.

No doubt there is significant truth in this perception, and we will return to it. However, postmodern cultural criticism on utopian hopes and mass communications raises critical questions about Cox's approach, even if we restrict our attention to conservative Protestants who *do* watch religious television and *don't* supplement it with other activities. For example, Fredric Jameson addresses roughly the same problem that troubles Cox: the possibility that mass communication might manipulate an audience so thoroughly that it is unable to form any alternative and independent judgements.<sup>34</sup> In such a case, mass culture would define "reality" for the audience, and hopes for organizing collective movements for change would disappear. Indeed collective identity would disappear, as defined apart from a faceless mass of individual consumers, brainwashed and pacified by mass media.

Such reasoning leads Cox (following Habermas) to search for opposition in small communities on the margins of dominant culture. But Jameson, like many other critics who work in a similar vein, refuses to despair about popular struggles in and through a world dominated by mass media. His argument starts from a simple observation: what a speaker *intends* to say (the preferred reading of a text) is not always what is *heard* (the received meaning) and the conclusions preferred by speakers and listeners may be in conflict. Like Cox, Jameson suspects the worst about the intentions of mass media producers and the marketing specialists who pay their salaries. But he insists that the preferred reading of any text—say the meaning of a television show as intended by the Coca-Cola company, which pays for it through advertising—is not necessarily the same as the meaning gained by the audience.

Jameson argues that alternative readings are possible even in worst case scenarios: very persuasive mass media texts that seem to manipulate their audience so thoroughly that it can only respond by "buying the Coke." He argues that such texts could not be persuasive, and therefore successful in making the sale, if they did not appeal to some real needs and concerns of the audience. In this sense, the voice of the audience must be built into the meaning of the mass media text, even in the process of channeling and distorting the voice. For example, no one would care

about “things going better with Coke” if the commercial did not evoke more substantial “things” that needed to “go better.” In this important sense, mass media keep collective needs and identities alive and continually feed desires for a better life. And audiences are free to use the parts of the text that appeal to them for whatever purposes they choose—they do not necessarily have to buy the Coke.

Religious television provides an excellent case study for Jameson’s theory. The shows are typically very explicit about the utopian hopes they evoke, and very blatant in their attempts to channel viewers’ desires toward the goal of keeping the gospel message alive and on the air (through donations to the evangelist for future broadcasts.) Oral Roberts, for example, begins and ends each show stating his goal: to help you “get your needs met” by God. The needs include not only inner peace, but also health, friendship and especially material success. He advocates “seed-faith” gifts to his ministry, and presents them as investments that God will pay back spectacularly in the giver’s material life.

The point is not that Jameson would endorse everything—or anything!—about religious television. It often encourages individualistic solutions to problems, rather than the “drive toward collectivity” posited by Jameson.<sup>35</sup> And he, like Cox, would perceive the collective solutions suggested by televangelists as highly dubious and often dangerous. Yet at the very least, religious television must evoke the audiences’ utopian hopes, thus helping to keep them alive in a muted form. And unless we assume that viewers of religious television always accept the interpretations preferred by the broadcasters, we can explore the audiences’ potential to use the utopian hopes evoked by the broadcast in their own way: that is, for their own ends, which may conflict with those preferred by the televangelists.

Is this mere abstract speculation? We are speaking of potentialities that may or may not be realized, especially in an oppositional form. However, we know that the preferred and received meanings of *ordinary* sermons can come into conflict, and that in the past such conflicts have sometimes been important for opposition. For example, some antebellum white evangelists hoped to pacify slaves by preaching to them about the spiritual equality of blacks and whites. Such a message could be received in the preferred way, as an argument for obedience on earth and a reward in heaven. But it could also be received as a hypocritical joke and an invitation to a future revolt to equalize things more concretely on earth, legitimated by a radical Afro-American reading of Christianity.<sup>36</sup> If ordinary sermons are open to diverse readings, perhaps television sermons are not different in principle.

Of course it would be foolish to deny that religious television often broadcasts false and misleading information and succeeds in channeling utopian aspirations toward ends that can hardly be described as opposi-

tional. In this regard televangelism is a particularly sharp reminder of the limits to Jameson's theory. The opposition he identifies is always limited because it deals with contested meanings; it is the product of an interplay between elite preferred readings and non-elite received meanings, which frequently takes place on a cultural terrain chosen by the elites. The theory allows critics to identify oppositional possibilities virtually anywhere; however, the compromises that are involved are not the same everywhere. For example, it is easier to identify counter-hegemonic possibilities in film noir than in Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour*, just as rap music makes more sense as an oppositional cultural style than heroin addiction does. To lump all these cases together because they evoke and channel utopian desires is to risk making opposition an inescapable net—the mirror image of the theories that present commercial mass media as a net smothering all opposition.

The only way to avoid this net of inescapable opposition is to set some kind of standards—to introduce distinctions between forms of opposition that appear more or less promising, based on some specified criteria. But this is a touchy subject for postmodern popular culture theory, for both general and specific reasons. In general, postmodern critics have gone to great lengths to avoid the tendency of modern liberal culture to impose purportedly “universal” standards on others. And postmodern critics who are specifically concerned with popular culture are especially suspicious of appeals to external standards, because such appeals have often been used to dismiss the indirect oppositional potential of popular culture. For example, skeptics asked how rock music could be considered promising for opposition by the standards of “real” political opposition. Postmodern critics replied, “Only by broadening the previous ‘common sense’ definition of what kinds of opposition are relevant and important.”

Is it appropriate to set standards that would judge televangelism, or evangelical popular religion more generally, as a relatively unpromising place to look for opposition? Setting external standards to define “relevant” opposition raises difficult problems of translation between different experiences of cultural “reality.” It risks passing judgment on a given cultural practice by criteria that might seem inappropriate, insensitive or overtly oppressive from the point of view of people engaged in the practice “from the inside.” In addition, external critics might be unable to perceive issues that are crucially important to insiders, perhaps even issues that will prove decisive for future opposition. For example, just as some external critics failed to see the importance of rock music for social change during the 1960s, some critics today may misunderstand current cultural practices—including some evangelical ones—because their theories about opposition limit what they are able to perceive. These problems with external standards suggest that postmodern cultural critics should avoid using external criteria that rule out the oppositional potential of

religious television. It may be important to give Falwell's viewers the benefit of doubt, hoping that the play of utopian ideas will be received and used according to the viewers' needs.

However, some tentative standards that distinguish between promising and unpromising forms of opposition are necessary and desirable for setting priorities and grounding a moral-political vision.<sup>37</sup> From this point of view, Cox has strong arguments for criticizing televangelism, as well as many other aspects of conservative Protestantism. The religious right is anti-pluralistic, Cox says. And, in general, "the worst mistake we could make today would be to convince ourselves that the bad old days when the sacred could be misused are over, that the critical blade of modern theology can now be safely sheathed."<sup>38</sup> In addition, Cox unabashedly favors social transformation in the interests of poor people and those who are oppressed because of race, sexuality or other reasons. Even though this is an external standard that runs the risk of imposing Cox's values and misperceiving other forms of opposition, it is defensible given the behavior and goals of many conservative evangelicals.<sup>39</sup> Given his moral-political commitments, Cox judges the base communities of liberation theology as a better model of religious opposition, and a more promising coalition partner, than televangelists. The choice is fairly clear-cut between, say, Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network and the religious contribution to popular organizing in El Salvador.

The upshot of this discussion of evangelicals and the media is complex. On one hand, Cox has good arguments for suggesting that the prospects for evangelical opposition are *relatively* weak, although this weakness is less the result of televangelism than a general by-product of evangelical accommodation to dominant culture. On the other hand, postmodern cultural theorists like Jameson provide strong arguments against ruling out the possibility of *significant* evangelical opposition, even in very unpromising cultural arenas such as televangelism. Jameson's arguments are important because Cox and other cultural critics who hope for social transformation must work with the raw materials that our culture gives them at a given time; they gain little by complaining, for example, that the United States is not Latin America, or that Pat Robertson has more money to buy television time than Daniel Berrigan.

In addition, postmodern cultural theory highlights how the residual power of religious traditions can be expressed and contested—not merely defeated and trivialized—within a society that communicates through commercial mass media. José Limón has shown how the oppositional hopes identified by Jameson are current manifestations of long-lasting historical traditions, often religious, that are shared by groups of people.<sup>40</sup> From this point of view it becomes obvious that keeping these traditions alive, even in quite twisted forms, may be very important for future opposition. Evangelicalism provides a complex matrix of ideas and values that can be

used in many different ways. Evangelicals read the same Bible as liberationists, and evangelical history includes not only Ku Klux Klan leaders, male supremacists and anti-communists, but also civil rights marchers, left wing populists, anti-imperialists and feminists.<sup>41</sup> Evangelicals who stress apocalyptic prophecies of the endtimes have identified elite policies in the United States with both God's will and with "Babylon," and such ideas have been linked to political stances along the full spectrum from passivity and alienation to reformist activism and violent revolt.<sup>42</sup> The evangelical tradition includes both Oral Roberts whose version of religious conversion promises that "God can turn it around for you," and Martin Luther King, Jr., who says "America, you must be born again. . . your whole structure must be changed."<sup>43</sup>

In other words, postmodern cultural theory suggests the value of refocusing Cox's analysis of evangelical opposition and its relation to mass media.<sup>44</sup> The most important question is not whether evangelicals evade the influence of televangelism, even though its largely conservative impact is real and important. Rather, the central issue is contestation between various interpretations of religious popular culture, not only among people uninfluenced by televangelism, but also *within* televangelism and across the whole spectrum of religious experience. Strong historical traditions exist that provide resources for oppositional popular religion, and critics should not completely dismiss their potential influence even in very unpromising arenas like Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour*.

If the issue is framed in this way, additional questions about the oppositional potential of evangelicalism come into view. Under what conditions do oppositional versions of religious traditions blossom and flower, and when do they subsist as more muted and submerged potentialities? Beyond this, when do the utopian aspects of religious traditions function as something more than unfulfilled *hopes* for a better life? Do they always play a role that a neo-Gramscian might call a "rehearsal for revolution" and a preacher might symbolize as a "foretaste of the Kingdom of God?" What is their relationship to *actualized* revolutionary movements or religious activists who seek concrete answers to their prayer, "God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? Perhaps most importantly, how should we relate all these abstract questions to empirical studies of particular people in the contemporary United States?

These questions cannot be answered in a short essay; indeed the answers that emerge will depend partly on collective interaction and organization in the future. But the questions lead back to the issue that introduced this paper: granted that popular religion is a site of cultural contestation, what are the prospects for versions of liberation theology rooted in mainstream popular evangelicalism? The above analysis of Cox helps conceptualize this problem more clearly. Negatively, we should not assume that the conservative evangelical establishment is primarily opposi-

tional toward the aspects of our society that Cox defines as modern. Nor should we assume that televangelism automatically neutralizes all religious opposition. Positively, we should conceive of religious opposition in relation to particular activities of historically specific people in a complex society; and we should remember that religious traditions, even within postmodern mass culture, can provide powerful resources for imagining and ultimately organizing change. Thus Cox is insightful when he suggests that there are significant resources for liberation theologies within mainstream popular evangelicalism, and his argument can be strengthened through the theoretical refinements I have suggested. There is ongoing contestation over the meaning of evangelical popular religion and its relation to hegemonic power. The question is who will win this contest.

## Notes

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1. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York, 1984), 267.

2. For an orientation to liberation theologies see William Tabb, ed., *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America* (New York, 1984); Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York, 1986); and Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (New York, 1987). Representative theological texts include Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York, 1973); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York, 1986); James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, 1969); and Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1982). See also Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, eds. *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco, 1989); Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, New York, 1983); Wilmore and James Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-79* (Maryknoll, New York, 1979); Craig L. Nesson, *Orthopraxis or Heresy: the North American Theological Response to Liberation Theology* (Atlanta, 1989).

3. For an orientation to this writing, see John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston, 1989); George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990); and Lipsitz, "This Ain't No Sideshow': Historians and Media Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988), 147-161. Giles Gunn provides a helpful introduction to poststructuralism in *The Criticism of Culture and the Culture of Criticism* (New York, 1987); one excellent collection of poststructuralist cultural criticism is Henry Louis Gates, ed., *'Race', Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1985). See also Stanley Fish, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" in *Is There a Text in This Class? the Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980), 322-37. An important discussion on the use of poststructuralism by cultural historians is "Old History and New: AHR Forum," *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989), 654-698.

4. On neo-Gramscian theory, see Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" and "Notes on Deconstructing 'the popular,'" in Ralphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1980), 5-27, 227-239; Raymond Williams, "The Uses of Cultural Theory" *New Left Review* 158 (1986), 19-31, and "Base and Super-

structure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review* 82 (November 1973), 3-16; and Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, 1989) and "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, Illinois, 1988), 17-34. An important discussion of the use of hegemony theory by cultural historians is Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988), 115-136, and several essays in response, including George Lipsitz, "The Struggle for Hegemony," 146-150.

5. On evangelicals in United States society, see George Marsden, ed., *Evangelicals in Modern America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984), and *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991); Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982); Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988* (New York, 1988); Samuel Hill and Dennis Owen, *The New Religious/Political Right in America* (Nashville, 1982); Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: the Politics of the Christian Right* (Boston, 1989); and Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, 1988).

6. On poststructuralist literary theory in academic biblical studies, see Stephen D. Moore, "The 'Post' Age Stamp: Does It Stick? Biblical Studies and the Postmodernism Debate," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 53 (1990), 543-560.

7. Fiske, *Reading the Popular*; Horace Newcomb, "On the Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984), 34-50; and Lipsitz, *Time Passages and Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight* (St. Louis, 1982).

8. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1984).

9. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, *Blues People* (New York, 1963), 201-202.

10. On liberation theologies, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, New York, 1983); Michael R. Candelaria, *Popular Religion and Liberation: the Dilemma of Liberation Theology* (Ithaca, New York, 1990) and Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, New York, 1980). On religion and popular culture in the United States see Peter Williams, *Popular Religion in America* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1980) and R. Laurence Moore, "Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America," *American Quarterly* 41 (June 1989), 216-242.

The most sophisticated discussions of popular religion as a resource for counter-hegemonic opposition in North America center on Afro-American religion and Hispanic popular Catholicism. See for example Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York, 1977); Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: the Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, 1990); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, North Carolina, 1990); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York, 1972); James Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York, 1972); Virgil Elizondo, "Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Cultural Symbol: 'the Power of the Powerless,'" *Concilium* 102 (1977), 25-33; Ramón Gutierrez, *When Padre Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Power and Sexuality in New Mexico, 1500-1860* (Stanford, 1990); and the August 1986 edition of *Concilium* on "Popular Religion" (Edinburgh, 1986), especially Virgil Elizondo, "Popular Religion as Support of Identity: A Pastoral-Psychological Case-Study Based on the Mexican-American Experience in the U.S.A.," 36-43.

11. Donald W. Dayton, "The Radical Message of Evangelical Christianity" in Tabb, *Churches in Struggle*, 211-222, is a helpful summary statement with a useful though brief bibliography. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York, 1986), 128-172, stresses a shift from significant opposition to predominant conservatism within white evangelicalism since World War I. See also Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York, 1976) and Barbara Ehrenreich, et. al., "Unbuckling the Bible Belt" *Mother Jones* (July/August 1986), 46-83. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Emerging Order* (New York, 1979) is a book that shares and intensifies a number of the problems of Cox's analysis. Fowler, *A New Engagement*, assesses the political views of United States evangelicals on a spectrum from right to left.

12. Conservative evangelicals tend to be satisfied with current evangelical priorities and see Cox as a liberal enemy in a new disguise. For more liberal commentators who see themselves as the Protestant vanguard, Cox's critique of fundamentalism is not harsh enough. Thus many reviewers have stressed how Cox criticizes the religious right's current contribution to postmodernity; the more conservative reviewers point this out with annoyance, and the more liberal with satisfaction. Particularly important reviews include Leonard Sweet, "Theology a la Mode: A Review of Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City*," *Reformed Journal* 34 (1984), 17-22; and Harvey Cox, et. al., "Religion in the Secular City: A Symposium,"

*Christianity and Crisis* February 20, 1984, 35-45. See especially the comments from Douglas Sturm, Cornel West and Will Campbell.

13. Important books by Cox include *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969); *Turning East: the Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York, 1977); and many others.

14. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1966).

15. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City*, 183.

16. The discussion of the "gelding of God" is on pp. 191-205. The "rupture" is discussed on 91f and *passim*.

17. Grant Wacker, "Uneasy in Zion: Evangelicals in Postmodern Society" in Marsden, *Evangelicals in Modern America*, 17-28, discusses the historiography of evangelicals, and the volume as a whole presents a number of approaches. See also the introductory essay in Leonard Sweet, *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (Macon, Georgia, 1984) and the works by Marsden cited in note 21.

18. The best orientation to these issues is Robert S. Michaelson and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Liberal Protestantism: Realities and Possibilities* (New York, 1986). See also William Hutchison, *Between the Times: the Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America* (New York, 1989).

19. Sweet, "The 1960s: the Crisis of Liberal Christianity and the Public Emergence of Evangelicalism" in Marsden, *Evangelicals in Modern America*, 29-45, is a good example of such an argument. See also Richard John Neuhaus, ed. *The Believable Futures of American Protestantism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988). An insightful critique is William Hutchison, "Past Imperfect: History and the Prospect for Liberalism" *Christian Century*, January 15, 1986 and January 1, 1986, 11-15 and 42-45.

20. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, 1984.) Lindbeck's political commitments are clear in "Confession and Community: an Israel-like View of the Church" *Christian Century*, May 9, 1990, 492-496. Jeffrey Stout provides a humorous and incisive "Lexicon of Postmodern Philosophy" in *Religious Studies Review* 13 (1987), 18-22.

21. Marsden, "Evangelicals, History, and Modernity" in *Evangelicals and Modern America*, 94-102; *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York, 1980); *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*; "The Religious New Right in Historical Perspective" in Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton eds., *Religion in America* (Boston, 1983), 150-68; and "The Plight of Liberal Protestantism," *Fides et Historia* 20 (1988), 45-50. Marsden interprets the current scene roughly as follows: the mainline denominations are floundering along with the postwar liberal culture they uncritically mirror. And conservative Protestants have thrived because they provide an alternative to liberal values—plausible answers, effective communities, and organizing skills well adapted to United States society. But this is an alternative to postwar liberal modernity with a strong tradition of harmony with nineteenth-century modernity. In addition, contemporary evangelicals are increasingly guilty of uncritically mirroring dominant society, thus opening themselves to the same dangers as contemporary liberals. On this latter point, see James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism—the Coming Generation* (Chicago, 1989).

22. Wacker, "Uneasy in Zion," 20. The quotation summarizes Martin Marty's approach, especially in "The Revival of Evangelicalism and Southern Religion" in David Harrell, ed., *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* (Macon, Georgia, 1981), 7-21; Wacker presents it as a paradigm for larger trends. Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco, 1978), was one of the first to stress accommodation to dominant culture among recent evangelicals. See also Frances Fitzgerald, "Reflections: Jim and Tammy" *New Yorker*, April 23, 1990, 45-87. Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), focuses on several other aspects of United States culture that are frequently interpreted as marginal reactions to more central historical traditions, and argues that they developed in harmony with dominant culture. I have discussed this issue at more length in "Protestantism and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Essay in Historiography." M.Th. Thesis, Luther Northwestern Seminary, 1987.

23. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City*, 46.

24. There is a key theological difference between Falwell's brand of political theology and the social gospel: the former has a premillennialist theory of eschatology, the latter a postmillennialist. In recent years there has been a growing movement of postmillennial conservative Protestants, called Reconstructionists. See Anson Shupe, "The Reconstructionist Movement on the New Christian Right," *Christian Century*, October 4, 1989, 880-802.

25. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City*, 57-58. As an analytical assessment of conservative evangelicals' prospects for success in a postmodern situation (as opposed to a normative judgment of the appropriateness of such success) these arguments are weak. It is easy to see why a postmodern critic might dislike Falwell's views on pluralism and the apocalypse, but it is difficult to see how this would prevent fundamentalism from gaining followers in a postmodern situation.

However, one might introduce a secondary distinction within the broader category of "postmodern" as a rupture with Cox's "modernity," between (1) "postmodern" as residual antimodernism dating from before "before modernity" and (2) "postmodern" in the more common sense as fully embracing pluralism, radical indeterminacy of interpretation, and so on. This might lead to the ironic possibility of understanding aspects of Falwell's message as "premodern postmodernism." Since there are so many complexities involved in defining when modernity began and, more importantly, what happens to "premodernity" when it exists in a dialogue with modernity for a long time, I have organized my discussion here around the central distinction between "modern" hegemony—which as I argue below, must be specified and broken down because its possible meanings are so diverse—and "postmodernism" as resistance to particular specified aspects of modern hegemony.

26. Lincoln and Mayima, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 10-16, provide a powerful argument for a "dialectical"—that is a complex and multivocal—model for understanding black Christianity. For example, they note that "the other-worldly aspect, the transcendence of social and political conditions, can have a this-worldly political correlate which returns to this world by providing an ethical and prophetic critique of the present social order." 12.

27. For more information on Falwell, see Frances Fitzgerald, *Cities on a Hill* (New York, 1986), 121-202; Hill and Owen, *The New Religious Political Right in America*; and Falwell, *Listen, America* (New York, 1980).

28. Will Campbell stresses this point vigorously his contribution to the *Christianity and Crisis* symposium cited in note 12.

29. On evangelical diversity, see Marsden, *Evangelicalism and Modern America*; Dayton, "The Radical Message of Evangelical Christianity"; Fowler, *A New Engagement*, and Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

30. On the relationship between Habermas and the analysis of U.S. religion, see Robert Wuthnow, et. al., *Cultural Analysis: the Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Jurgen Habermas* (London, 1984) and Robert Wuthnow, "Civil Privatism and the State" in *The Struggle for America's Soul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989), 97-115.

31. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City*, 67-70 and *passim*. See also Cox, "Religion, Politics, Television," *Christianity and Crisis*, November 17, 1987, 408-409.

32. Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, 196, estimates that 13 million people were regular viewers of religious television in the mid-1980s; a common estimate of the total number of "born-again" Christians is 50 million. For a concise discussion of debates about the number of viewers of televangelism, see Diamond, *Spiritual Politics*, 35-38. See also Jeffrey Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier* (New York, 1988) and Michael Starr, "Prime Time Jesus," in Paul Buhle, ed., *Popular Culture in America* (Minneapolis, 1987), 163-173.

33. Wuthnow explores this issue and relates it to Habermas in *The Struggle for America's Soul*, 115-141.

34. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979), 130-148.

35. *Ibid.*, 148.

36. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

37. Sensitive explorations of this problem include Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" *Feminist Studies* 14 (Fall 1988), 575-599, and West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*.

38. Cox, *Religion in Secular City*, 171.

39. For an account of the nexus between conservative evangelicals and extreme right wing politics, see Diamond, *Spiritual Politics*.

40. José Limón, "Western Marxism and Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 96 (1983), 34-52.

41. For general evidence on a left tradition in evangelicalism, see the references in footnote 11. See also Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1988) and Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco, 1981).

42. On this tradition, see Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1982*. 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1987) and Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1977). For arguments stressing its possible oppositional interpretations, see Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, 128-150, and Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 53-73. Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 210, captures some of the ambiguities in the tradition with this example of a gospel hymn by Charles Tindley, dating from the early twentieth century: "Our boasted land and nation, Are plunging in disgrace/With pictures of starvation in almost every place/ While loads of hoarded money, Remains in hoarded piles/But God will rule this country, After a while."

43. David Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco, 1985). Vincent Harding, "Beyond Amnesia: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Future of America," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987), 472.

44. In an article that appeared as I was making final revisions in this paper, Cox argued for a similar refocusing of the debate about Latin American evangelicals and their relationship to international popular culture. See "Inculturation Reconsidered," *Christianity and Crisis*, May 13, 1991, 140-142.